



Unsplash

The NYT Misrepresents the History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

A welter of factual errors and misleading judgments has produced a distorted description of the 1948 War.



Benny Morris

27 Feb 2024 · 12 min read



As we saw from the savage Hamas assault on southern Israel on October 7, the Palestinians have certainly been active protagonists

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their more-than-century-long battle against Zionism and Israel. But the *New York Times* would have it otherwise. Indeed, the underlying narrative in their magazine piece of 6 February 2024, “[The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Long Shadow of 1948](#),” is that the Palestinians have always lacked agency and have no responsibility for anything that has befallen them over the decades. This, plus a welter of factual errors and misleading judgments, has produced a seriously distorted description of the history of the first Arab–Israeli war and its origins.

The Road to 1948, and the Roots of a Perpetual Conflict

How the decisions that led to the founding of Israel have brought unending conflict to the region.

 The New York Times • A discussion moderated ...



The *Times* article consists of a lengthy “discussion” between Arab and Jewish scholars (three ostensibly from each side) and comments and clarifications (and mis-clarifications) by Emily Bazelon, the *NYT* staff writer who moderated the dialogue and put the piece together. Five of the six people involved can hardly be deemed experts on either the Arab–Israeli conflict or the 1948 war. Only one—Itamar Rabinovich, a former Israeli ambassador to Washington—has published works of some relevance: *The Road Not Taken* (1991), on the clandestine post-1948 Arab–Israeli peace talks, and *The War for Lebanon* (1984), on the Israel–PLO war of the early 1980s. During the discussion, the three Arab panellists—Nadim Bawalsa, an associate editor of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*; Leena Dallasheh, who is writing a book on Nazareth in the 1940s and ’50s; and Salim Tamari, a sociologist from Bir Zeit

University in the West Bank—almost uniformly toe the PLO (or Hamas) line, which is indistinguishable from propaganda.

The drift of the *Times* article is that the innocent Arabs of Palestine just sat back and watched, as suffering victims, as the Zionists, Israel, and some international actors, principally Great Britain, did their worst.

This is pure nonsense.

Throughout the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, Palestine's Arabs consistently rejected all proposals for a political compromise and flatly demanded all of Palestine, "from the river to the sea." And they did not restrict their activities to roundtable discussions. In April 1920, May 1921, and August 1929, Arab mobs, whose passions had been whipped up by religious and political leaders, attacked their Jewish neighbours and passers-by in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Hebron, and Safad, killing dozens in what amounted to a succession of pogroms. (The *New York Times* studiously avoids this word, referring to them only as "assaults.")

Emily Bazelon informs readers that the first bout of violence took place when the 1920 Muslim Nebi Musa festivities in Jerusalem "turned into a deadly riot," in which "five Jews and four Arabs [were] killed." Neither she nor any of the panellists mention that an Arab mob attacked, murdered, and wounded Jews or that the crowd of perpetrators chanted "*nashrab dam al-yahud*" ('we will drink the blood of the Jews'). Nor does she tell us that the crowd shouted, "Muhammad's religion was born with the sword," according to eyewitness Khalil al Sakakini, a Christian Arab educator. After three days of rampage and despoliation, British mandate security forces finally restored order, killing all or most of the four Arabs Bazelon mentions in the process. The findings of the subsequent British investigation are included in the

July 1920 [Palin Report](#), which states: “All the evidence goes to show that these [Arab] attacks were of a cowardly and treacherous description, mostly against old men, women and children—frequently in the back.”

During the May 1921 pogroms, which encompassed Jaffa, Hadera, Rehovot, and Petah Tikva, dozens of Jews were killed, and women were raped. In the efforts to restore peace, British security forces killed dozens of the attackers. Leading contemporary Zionist journalist Itamar Ben-Avi wrote: “The Islamic wave and stormy seas will eventually break loose and if we don’t set a dike ... they will flood us with their wrath ... Tel Aviv, in all her splendour ... will be wiped out.”

The August 1929 riots were deliberately incited by the mufti of Jerusalem, the country’s senior Muslim cleric, Haj Muhammad Amin al Husseini, who was soon to emerge as the leader of the Palestine Arab national movement. He and his aides told the Arab masses that the Jews intended to destroy Al Aksa Mosque on the Temple Mount and build a (third) Jewish temple on the site, and that they had “violated the honour of Islam and raped the women and murdered widows and babies.” The resultant riots started in Jerusalem and quickly spread throughout Palestine. Dozens of Jews were massacred, and many Jewish women were raped, in the area around Jerusalem, and in Hebron and Safad. The British High Commissioner, John Chancellor, condemned “the atrocious acts committed by bodies of ruthless and bloodthirsty evildoers ... upon defenceless members of the Jewish population [with] ... acts of unspeakable savagery.” The British Shaw Commission, which investigated the multiple pogroms, concurred.

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Bazon comments that in 1929 the “Palestinians rebelled” against the British and “violence first broke out over control of the holy sites in Jerusalem.” (Throughout the *New York Times* piece, Bazon uses the phrase “violence broke out,” instead of explicitly stating that the Arabs assaulted the Jews, though she does concede that in 1929 Jews were massacred in Hebron and Safad). The Canadian Derek Penslar of Harvard University, one of the three Jewish panellists, explains that “Muslims thought ... that the Jews were planning to take over the Temple Mount” and recommends to readers Israeli historian Hillel Cohen’s book *Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: 1929*, which argues that the Jews and the Arabs were equally to blame for the violence of that year. Indeed, Cohen writes that Jews—not Arabs—initiated the cycle of murders in Jerusalem that set off the countrywide violence. Penslar’s sympathies seem clear here and elsewhere—as when he remarks that “Many Zionists wanted to believe that they represented progress,” the implication being that he thinks otherwise.

The panellists then discuss the crucial years 1936–39, when the Arabs rebelled against the British—the Arabs like to call the previous bout of violence, of 1929, a “rebellion,” though it wasn’t—and the British, partly in response, eventually switched from supporting Zionism to supporting the Arabs. In November 1936, during a pause in the fighting, the British sent the Peel Commission to investigate matters and propose a solution. The commission, composed of eminent jurists, ex-diplomats, and academics, recommended that the British abandon the Mandate and that Palestine be partitioned into two states: a Jewish

state, on 17 percent of the land; and an Arab state on most of the rest. The British were to retain Jerusalem and Bethlehem, together with a thin corridor to the Mediterranean.

Penslar admits that the Palestinians “rejected partition out of hand.” This is true. But he adds: “The Zionists split over the proposal. Some [opposed partition] ... More pragmatic Zionists accepted partition in principle but rejected [the 17 percent share, as they desired a larger state].”

This is a misleading attempt to project even-handedness. The inexperienced reader is left with the impression that neither the Zionists nor the Arabs endorsed the proposed compromise. In fact, against the backdrop of the Arab Revolt and the looming threat of the Holocaust in Europe, the representatives of the Zionist movement, led by David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann, abandoned their traditional claim to all of Palestine and resigned themselves to partition—although they did hope to negotiate a greater share of Palestine to be earmarked for Jewish statehood. As Weizmann at one point put it, because of the acute need for a safe haven for European Jewry, the movement would accept a state “even the size of a tablecloth.”

The *New York Times* describes the 1948 War in the same euphemistic terms as the Arab attacks of 1920, 1921, and 1929. The 1948 War, Bazelon explains, simply “broke out.” This is an obfuscation. What actually happened is that the Arabs of Palestine and the surrounding Arab states rejected the United Nations General Assembly partition proposal of 29 November 1947, Resolution 181, and the following day, militiamen/terrorists ambushed two Jewish buses near Tel Aviv and snipers fired at Jewish passers-by in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, thus initiating the civil war between the Jews and Arabs of Palestine. In May

1948, following the Palestinian failure to halt the establishment of a Jewish state, the armies of the neighbouring Arab states invaded the country.

A similar distortion of the historical record informs the experts' discussion of the international context of the conflict. Blame is laid at every doorstep except that of the Arabs. The British, who ruled Palestine from 1917–18 until mid-May 1948, are portrayed as gung-ho pro-Zionists and Arab bashers. The reality was more nuanced. True, in November 1917, London issued the Balfour Declaration, which expressed support for the establishment of a Jewish “national home” in Palestine. But during the first years of British control, the rulers were frankly hostile toward the Zionist enterprise and in the years that followed, while they protected the Zionist enterprise—albeit avoiding any explicit endorsement of Jewish statehood—the British sporadically curbed Jewish immigration to Palestine. In 1938–1939, the British definitively switched sides: they turned against Zionism and supported Arab majority rule over Palestine, as presaged in the White Paper of May 1939. This remained British policy until the last days of the Mandate. Even as World War Two was raging, the British naval blockade prevented Jews from escaping the Holocaust in Europe and reaching Palestine's shores. London stopped supporting Jewish statehood and abstained from the crucial November 1947 UN vote on partition. In the 1948 war, the British supported the Arabs in various ways, including by supplying them with arms, continuing the anti-Jewish blockade of the country's shores until mid-May 1948, and threatening to intervene directly against the IDF in the south (though it is true that the Mandate government in Jerusalem and the withdrawing British troops generally behaved even-handedly—a fact misrepresented in both Israeli and Palestinian historiography).

Panellist Tamari is therefore quite mistaken when he concludes: “The British were largely complicit in the [1948] Arab defeat.”

But the article’s worst historical distortions concern the events surrounding the Second World War. Penslar claims that “between 9,000 and 12,000 Palestinians fought for the Allied forces in World War II.” In fact, as far as I know, it is doubtful whether *any* Palestine Arabs actually “fought” during the war, though perhaps some 6,000 of Palestine’s 1.2 million Arabs signed up with the British and served as cooks, drivers, or guards in British installations in Palestine. By comparison, around 28,000 of Palestine’s Jews—out of a population of around 550,000—joined the British army, and many of them actually fought in North Africa and Italy in 1941–1945.

This talk of Palestine Arabs “fighting” alongside the British is, at best, misleading. Palestine’s Arabs—like most of the Middle East’s Arabs—would have preferred a Nazi German victory and the defeat of the Western democracies. The British were seen as the common enemy of the Germans and the Palestinians. As Sakakini, a Palestinian nationalist, relates in a diary entry of 1941, the Arabs of Palestine “had rejoiced when the British bastion at Tobruk fell to the Germans,” and “not only the Palestinians rejoiced ... but the whole Arab world.”

This support for Hitler wasn’t merely a matter of the old adage that “my enemy’s enemy is my friend.” Muhammed Amin al-Husseini, the leader of the Palestine national movement, was an outspoken antisemite. He aided the 1941 pro-Nazi revolt in Baghdad. When it collapsed, he fled to Berlin, where he spent the rest of the war years enjoying a handsome salary for his work as a Nazi propagandist and a recruiter of Balkan Muslims for the SS.

Palestine's Arabs thus assisted in the destruction of European Jewry in two ways: They successfully pressured the British into closing the gates of Palestine to European Jews fleeing the Holocaust; and they supported Germany's efforts to win the war. In radio broadcasts from Berlin, Husseini called on the Arab world to rebel against Britain and "kill the Jews."

Podcast #227: The October 7 Terrorist Attacks: a Historical Perspective

Quillette podcast host Jonathan Kay talks to influential Israeli historian Benny Morris about Hamas' acts of...

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All these inconvenient facts are shoved under the carpet in the *New York Times* piece. Leena Dallasheh does briefly mention that "the mufti made a visit to Hitler," which "is often used against the Palestinians." But she quickly adds that, "In siding with Hitler, the mufti was not representative of the Palestinian community. Many people rejected Nazism." Bazelon backs her up. In a footnote, she cites Lebanese scholar Gilbert Ashcar's book *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*, which, she says, "notes articles in the Arab press that denounced Nazi brutality and fascism." (Ashcar teaches at SOAS, The London School of Oriental and African Studies.) Tamari slightly offsets this whitewashing by noting that "by allying with Hitler, the mufti completely undermined himself with the British and with the European states."

Towards the end of the panel discussion, Bazelon asks: why did the Palestinians reject partition in 1947? This is the crux of the issue since

their rejection of partition then is arguably the reason why the Palestinians do not have a state to this day. The panellists offer a variety of misleading answers. Abigail Jacobson, a historian at Tel Aviv University and one of the three Jewish participants, argues that the Palestinians could not accept a resolution that earmarked 55 percent of Palestine for the Jews, who only comprised a third of the country's population, while the Arabs—two-thirds of the population—were only awarded 45 percent of the land. "If you were a Palestinian," she asks her readers, "would you accept this offer?" But Jacobson forgets that most of the land assigned to the Jewish state was barren wasteland in the Negev Desert. She also elides the basic truth, which is that the real reason the Palestinian leadership opposed the resolution was that they opposed the grant of any part of Palestine—no matter how small a percentage of the land—to Jewish sovereignty. In their view, all of Palestine, every inch, belonged solely to the Palestinian Arabs. Jacobson argues that "the Palestinian national movement was ready to accept the Jews as a minority within an Arab state." That is correct. But the point is that they were *only* willing to accept them as such.

Tamari takes an even more misleading tack by arguing that while "partition was certainly rejected by much of the Palestinian leadership," "[a]t least half the Palestinian political class" favoured it—an assertion for which there is not a shred of evidence. He says that the Defence Party, headed by the Nashashibis, and the "Palestinian federation of labour" both favoured partition. But in fact, the Nashashibis did *not* support partition and the Palestinian "federation of labour" was a completely insignificant body—if it actually ever existed beyond a heading on stationery. In any case, the Palestinian national movement was led and dominated by the popular Haj Amin

and the Husseinis, and no one in November–December 1947 stood up to oppose them over partition.

Finally, the article's meagre treatment of the 1948 War is itself fraught with errors. Take Bazelon's introductory paragraph describing the war's second half. Her first sentence is correct: "On May 14, Israel declared itself a state." But then she adds, "The next day, the British began leaving, and Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq attacked the new state, later joined by Jordan." This sentence contains no less than three basic errors. Firstly, the British had already begun their staggered withdrawal from Palestine in December 1947, and had lowered the Union Jack on 14 (not 15) May, though some small British units remained in the north of the country until the end of June 1948. Secondly, Lebanon never attacked Israel. And thirdly, Jordan participated in the pan-Arab invasion of 15 May, rather than joining "later."

Tamari blithely dismisses the war by saying that the Palestinians and the Arab states were weak and that "the Arab defeat was almost a foregone conclusion." But this only seems true in retrospect. In May 1948, the American and British intelligence services predicted an Arab victory and the acting chief of staff of the main Jewish militia, the Haganah, Yigael Yadin (who became the acting Chief of the General Staff of the IDF), told a worried gathering of Zionist leaders that there was a "50–50" chance of defeat. In truth, at the outset of the war no one knew how well or poorly the Arab forces would perform.

All in all, it is unfortunate that the readers of the *New York Times* have been given a biased, distorted view of the 1948 War and its origins, at a time when truth and accuracy about the history of the conflict should be at a premium.

Israel

Palestine

History

Media Analysis



Benny Morris

Benny Morris is an Israeli historian and author. His books include *1948: A History of the First Arab–Israeli War* (Yale UP, 2008) and most recently *Sidney Reilly: Master Spy* (Yale UP, 2022).

Member discussion

60 comments

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E

Edoardo luna

5 days ago

Israel just massacred 1000 starving unarmed civilians in broad daylight

Israel and its supporters have no conscience and no shame

Anybody who support Israel is rather stupid ,demented or sadistic

and you will see soon hear from this cohort defending the indefensible

As always

Maybe the starving people were screaming. We hate Jews, and that's what compelled their slaughter

by the most moral military in the world,

Who knows maybe the anti-Semitism label that it will slap on the starving message will be enough for the world to accept their justification,

♡ 1

MR

Mark P Rudow

4 days ago

Typical anti-Israel hater. He Inflates the Hamas supplied casualties numbers by an order of magnitude and blames it all on Israel. I'm sure. Mr. Luna did the same with the al-Ahli Arab Hospital blood libel. His responses actually prove the point of the article, the Palestinians have absolutely no agency and they are perennially the perfect victim. Bizarrely, he displays his bigotry towards both sides. The Israeli's are uniquely evil and the Palestinians denied agency by his bigotry of low expectations.

♡ 2

GH

George Hamor

3 days ago

And one supposes that all the archeological discoveries dating back to 2000 BC and beyond are fakes purchased from a bazaar in Istanbul..

You have zero knowledge of history. The Jews are the only indigenous people of the land.

You also conveniently dismiss the fact that Arabs largely settled in the land once they saw that the Jews were able to make the desert bloom.

♡ 2

E

Edoardo luna

3 days ago · Edited

Unbelievable these putrid-brained Israel defenders have something seriously wrong with them

if you're defending mass murder of over 30,000 civilians half of my women and children starving them on top of that attacking their hospitals, depriving of any medical care and yes Israelis and Zionist Jews are sui generis evil

And what's worse is they don't even hide their disgusting sadistic War on Palestinians and yes, the problem all began when people that did not belong there to wit :The Zionist European Jews decided to take over a land where Arabs have been living for millennia. so anything that happened after that it was just resistance and self-defense on part of the Arabs and anyone in their right mind would hate Israel and the world is starting to see what Israel's all about a disgusting artificially contrived state with no historical identity.

They rely on a a purported ancient real estate deal with God handing them the deed to Palestine

What a joke and they're the only culture ideology, people or whatever call it

Israel claims they were there 3000 years before and now they want it back. No one has ever done that in the history except the racist

Zionist and Zionist Jews, Who wants special treatment

World is opening up its eyes to the dark reality of the racist barbarism of the Zionist entity

♡ 0

E

Edoardo luna

3 days ago · Edited

Ethan proves my point that Israel defenders cloak the Zionist false narrative in "erudite" discourse

no one including myself, has ever claimed that they were no Jews in Palestine there were, but they were a very small number. Maybe Ethan has to read the Ottoman Empire's census to know this. I would make it recommended reading for Ethan et al. Ethan should know that it doesn't mean that it's right or gives right for Jews to populate a land, and create a Jews only racist nation on the backs of the people that were living there for millennia - the Arabs

♡ 0



Ethan

Yesterday

@Eduardo luna: I was responding to your claim that, as you put it, Jews are "interlopers" in the region of what is now Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. You are right that Jews were a small minority in the Ottoman empire. We can quibble about numbers in various places but that is not really the issue as I see it. The issue is that as the old world of polyglot but hierarchical empires crumbled and as the world moved toward an organization based on another bad idea -- nation-states -- there was a contest for state creation. The Jews participated in that process as did other minorities. So yes Jews were a small minority who legitimately and successfully veighed for tiny a state. You seem to be saying -- in between all your blustery invective - - that Zionism is illegitimate because Jews were a minority. So then is your position that all minorities lack the right to national self-determination? Or just any Jewish minority? By your theory, only majorities have that right? Or is there some nercentile threshold that would have given Jews the

some percentile threshold that would have given Jews the right to seek a nation? Is this really your argument. Or perhaps you are just trolling...which leads me to the next thing.

Above you implied that I somehow prove your "point that Israel defenders cloak the Zionist false narrative in "erudite" discourse." I have to admit I don't know what you are talking about when you say the "Zionist false narrative." Do you mean the narrative that Jews have a right to self-determination? I don't really think most Zionists cloak that narrative. I guess they just come out and say it, to your face. I myself don't take myself to be a Zionist so much as I am an anti-anti-Zionist. I wish we didn't need nation-states but I recognize we live in a world still where all, or most, rights accrue to people through nationhood. So I can't really fault nationalists, and I certainly can't find any sense in rating one nationalism as more legitimate than another. As far as I'm concerned the history of national formation has been tragic almost everywhere. So there is a narrative here. I don't think it is all that erudite sadly. But it is certainly not cloaked. I don't agree with you that Zionism is some kind essential evil or that Zionists, as you put it above, are "putrid-brained."

I'd also like to say that I think the only point you are interested in making here is a flat delegitimization. You want to dismiss what I or anyone else writes by suggesting they are part of some nefarious Zionist conspiracy rather than having an argument in good faith. You want to believe that that there is no complexity, that history could be perfect but for the nasty Jewish Zionists, and anyone who sees something other than that you want to classify as evil and therefore 100% illegitimate. You want to silence any dissent from your black and white vision that is charged with a sense of moral clarity. And so over and over again you try to string together words that will erase any nuance. That kind of moral clarity is a dangerous thing. It's the kind of attitude that leads to violence and brutality because it is an attitude where there is no such thing as doubt or self-reflection. I would challenge you to understand that there are people who are Zionists who also feel morally shattered by where this conflict has arrived and who feel genuinely

by where this conflict has arrived and who feel genuinely lost as to how to get to any sort of resolution. You my friend are not the only one who has moral feelings of outrage. You just express it loudly in one very simple way that has a definite target.

♡ 1

BA Ben A

Yesterday

Ethan, I wouldn't even bother responding to the lightweight Finkelstein-esque gibberish below. This guy just isn't going to change his views one iota or absorb thoughtful counterpoints.

♡ 1

E Edoardo luna

Yesterday

Well for one false narrative how about this beauty straight from Madison Avenue

1-A land without a people for a people without a land,"

2-Israel made the desert bloom,

Palestine was blooming way before the Zionist invasion one of the greatest and biggest agriculture community was in the Yaffa you can't grow produce in the desert

3-The Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity,

Abba Eben, the Spox for Israel disingenuously made that comment and people continue to use that false food because they just give their docile audience partial information and doesn't go on to tell them what the Arabs turned down. when you do your homework and know what they turned down, he would know that no people in the world would ever have accepted the conditions imposed upon upon them.

Do you want more?

And I've never said that minorities shouldn't have a nation. Nobody should have a nation on top of a nation of people that already

exist. How is that gonna work? as you can see it's not working very well.

And as Ayn Rand avered when asked about rights she responded

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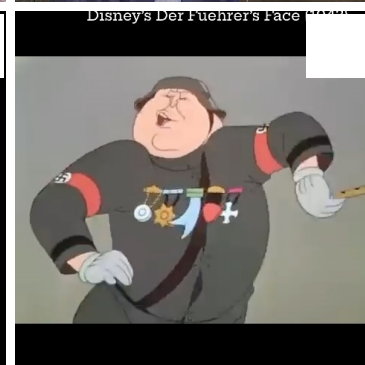
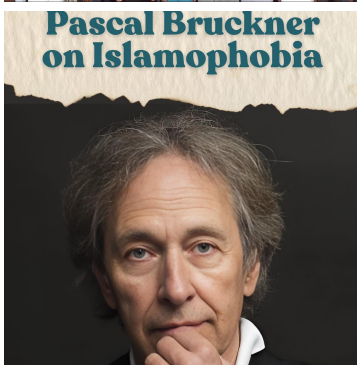
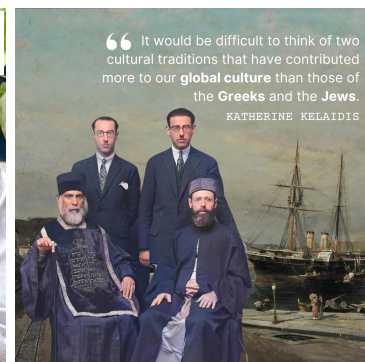
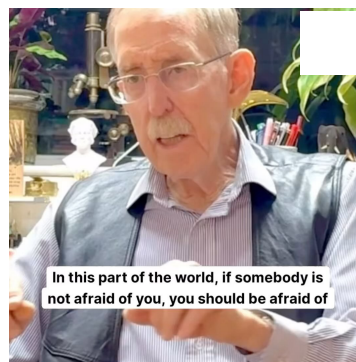
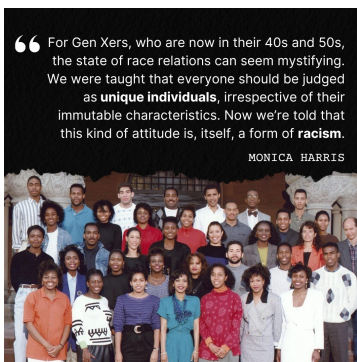


James Graham

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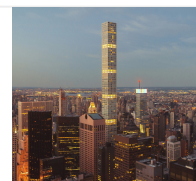
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